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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by World Young Women's Christian Association, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

Invest in education for women and girls: prevent violence and HIV

1. The World YWCA joins the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and other organizations in celebrating and reviewing the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action strategic objective L4 which calls for the elimination of discrimination against girls in education, skills development and training. This objective also resonates with article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which requires that Member States be obliged to eliminate discrimination against women to ensure equal rights between men and women in education, as well as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the commitments in the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum.

2. Recognizing that education, skills development and training are key to women's empowerment, rights and especially to the prevention of violence against women and HIV; the World YWCA calls on the Commission on the Status of Women to:

- Increase investment in education for women and girls, including comprehensive sexuality education, as key to addressing poverty and promoting the social and cultural empowerment of women, particularly in the context of HIV.
- Involve women and girls in policy dialogues on education to create safe and inclusive educational approaches that will empower young women and will create equal learning opportunity and access to technical training and job markets in science and technology.
- Include a rights perspective in education policies to address the gender disparity between women and men and the protection of girls, since education is an enabling right that will give women and girls a voice for claiming their human rights.
- Demand the right to productive employment and access to decent work for young women. This is core to economic growth policies and poverty reduction strategies at national, regional and global levels.
- Promote vocational and non-formal education programmes that reach out-of-school girls in a safe and inclusive environment and include their right to comprehensive sex education and information on HIV.

3. Promoting women's leadership, including equitable representation of women, young women and women living with HIV, at the highest levels of national political, executive, legislative and judicial structures is key to the achievement of the above commitments.

4. The World YWCA has been involved in education and training of women globally since it was founded in 1894. In 1947, it lobbied for the inclusion of women in the reconstruction programme for Japan and, since then, the YWCA movement has played a key role in advocating for equal opportunities for women and girls in education and training as well as family-friendly labour market policies.

* Issued without formal editing.

The World YWCA has actively supported its national associations to provide opportunities for young women to acquire vocational skills that improve their access to labour markets.

5. The World YWCA uses this expertise to contribute to policy dialogues on the critical role of science and technology in economic productivity and the economic empowerment of women. Fifteen years after Beijing, and in recognition of the gender targets in the Education for All goals and MDGs 2 and 3 on universal access to education and the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, various advocacy campaigns and researchers have noted that progress in women's education, which has been strongly influenced by the women's movement's promotion of education as a core strategy for empowering women, has had a significant impact on countries' economic indicators and the overall well-being of households.

6. The World YWCA has also supported programmes and drawn attention to the quality of education that young women are receiving — especially around their sexual and reproductive health that includes dialogue around sexuality. Young women who have access to quality and comprehensive education that addresses their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are more confident and able to make life choices that reduce vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections, especially HIV and unintended or early pregnancies.

7. The right to education is enshrined in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It is recognized as an entitlement to free primary education, secondary education and equitable access to higher education and skills training for the labour market. Unfortunately, for many women and girls, this right is not guaranteed due to various economic, social and cultural challenges. In many countries the realization of this right is further eroded as a result of discrimination against women. In a recent keynote speech, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that globally one in five girls of primary school age are not in school compared to one in six boys. More than 55 million girls receive no formal schooling and in many developing countries women are 30 per cent less likely to be literate than men. Many girls are forced out of the formal school system because of poverty, distance, unsafe school environment, armed conflict, occupation, patriarchal systems and gender discrimination that limit young women's access to equal opportunities in education. This right to education also includes three components for young women living positively with HIV: the right to information on prevention, treatment and care; the right to access the highest level of educational opportunities to achieve their full potential without discrimination; and the right to full employment and decent work.

8. Young women's unequal access to full employment and decent work is further exacerbated by HIV. Women living with HIV carry a triple burden as HIV-positive women, caring for family members, and working in sectors that discriminate against people living with HIV. There are many cases of young women who have lost their jobs because of discrimination and stigma. Equal opportunity to work in a health environment is especially important for women living with HIV — who irrespective of age should have access to employment opportunities that do not require an HIV test to secure a job.

9. The World YWCA has also been lobbying for women's rights to access full employment and decent work since the early 1950s and was involved in the International Labour Organization (ILO) policy dialogue on labour laws, such as equal pay for equal work. The ILO, in addressing women's access to full employment, also recognized the importance of a work life balance, and in 1981 developed a policy framework for addressing the needs of workers with family responsibility. This flexible tool allows both male and female workers to exercise their right to full employment by providing childcare, maternity and paternity leaves. YWCAs around the world have responded to this need by providing preschools and day care for children, holiday programmes and non-formal programmes for young mothers.

10. Despite this progress, young women's access to full employment and decent work remains limited due to the prevailing culture of occupation segregation based on the caretaker role of women. Most young women are educated, trained and employed in the service sectors: food, tourism, education and health. These sectors have limited social protection and have been severely affected by the global financial crisis through disinvestment from social sectors and reallocated investment in the financial and construction sectors. This has led to higher levels of unemployment among women, negative trends such as causal employment and lack of social protection.

11. Safety and security of all women is crucial to peace and development. There can be no peace if women are not protected from violence and are not aware of their rights. Without education women cannot claim their rights. Many women continue to live in abusive relationships and have limited opportunities in accessing justice and service, because of lack of education, lack of income and exclusion associated with poverty. When women have education, skills and training, they have possibilities to negotiate safe and supportive relationships, and options and choices for their personal safety and well-being.

12. Several recent United Nations resolutions, including Security Council resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888 and 1889, show commitment to end women's vulnerability, especially in conflict areas. All women, especially young women, need to know and understand this framework. The State should take conscious steps to ensure that young women are trained as peace mediators with skills in conflict resolution and gender analysis. Moreover, many young women lack the technical skills for negotiating access to reconstruction funds focused on the economic and production sectors, which often replace women's livelihood options. UNDP Administrator Helen Clark, in a side event on Security Council resolution 1325, recently highlighted that often resources coming into conflict and post-conflict countries are targeted at relief and humanitarian sectors, mainly infrastructure and distribution systems, and women are absent from these sectors.

13. It is essential that a critical transformative opportunity is not lost when women are excluded from the discussion on resource allocation for peacebuilding and reconstruction. The discussion must include education and training. Investing in education for women and girls therefore lies at the heart of the empowerment, rights and development agenda.